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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a current synthesis of key research and new understandings of adult learners' participation and involvement in undergraduate collegiate studies. It suggests that new theory and understandings are needed to provide broader and more complex frameworks for understanding and supportive adult student engagement in undergraduate studies. Current research indicates that adult students experience college differently and act on the college experience in ways that differ from those of the traditional college student. Adult students present a different set of challenges to the higher education research community because they have different characteristics. There also appear to be differences within the adult undergraduate student population regarding their sense of involvement and engagement in relation to their life biography and their current institutional context. New theory informed by research suggests a focus on the classroom for the adult student, rather than on the college environment, and on experiences connected to current adult lives and knowledge structures. (Contains 2 tables and 28 references.) (SLD)

What is collegiate involvement for adult undergraduates?

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SYMPOSIUM

What Does Research Suggestion About Effective College Involvement Of Adult Undergraduate Students?

April 21, 2003

American Educational Research Association

Chicago, Illinois

Symposium Presenters:

Dr. Jovita Ross-Gordon, Southwest Texas State University
Minority adult learners: Listening to voices of the double "other"

Dr. Joe Donaldson, University of Missouri-Columbia
Adult college outcomes: Ruptures in form and process

Dr. Carol Kasworm, North Carolina State University, Chair
What is collegiate involvement for adult undergraduates?

Moderator/Reactor: Dr. Deborah Kilgore, Iowa State University

What Does Research Suggestion About College Involvement Of Adult Undergraduate Students?

Overview of Symposium:

Over the past thirty years, the growing presence of nontraditional college students has impacted both the forms and the functions of higher education. Currently, 75% of current undergraduate students are "nontraditional"-- because they are older; they have experienced a gap in their collegiate enrollment; they are part-time learners, they are minorities; or they are financially independent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Of this percentage, more than half are over the age of 25 years of age, while the remainder (under 25) represents an adult lifestyle that significantly influences the nature of their participation in college.

Current literature on key principles and theories of collegiate learning and participation in college continue to be grounded in young, full-time students in residential liberal arts college. This literature often presumes that college students actively pursue learning from limited life experiences and full time involvement with classes, fellow students, and faculty members. Co-curricular and extra-curricular involvements are paramount to positive college impacts upon learning. Through this literature, it is apparent that college involvement is defined as a young adult, middle-class, Caucasian involvement. It has been amply demonstrated that these premises, with significant support of past research literature on college learner characteristics and learning experiences, have limited utility and relevance in today's college environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Further, from the landmark discussions by (Cross, 1981) to more contemporary research by (Grubb, 1999) on learner characteristics and instructional practices, it is obvious that collegiate environments need

to modify their practices to reflect this new population. But how can faculty and higher education administrators reframe their understandings, much less their reflective practice, to effectively serve these more diverse and elusive group of adult students? This symposium explores three key themes in current collegiate discussions of effective participation:

1) Cultural differences through an examination of research on minority adult learners,
2) Research on outcomes assessment of learners who reflect nontraditional characteristics and participation patterns.
3) Research on adult students' involvement and participation.

Each of these presentations a) delineate key disjunctures between current collegiate practices and nontraditional student characteristics, b) present current research on adult higher education and its relevance to current collegiate environments, and c) suggest foundational understandings for crafting learning environments and instructional practices directed to the adult learner. A fourth participant offers a provocateur discussion of these disjunctures and the challenges presented in this research discussion in relation to student access, retention, and learning. This symposium offers a complex and multi-framed perspective of a synthesis of current research as well as an informing critique to reflect upon our future research and practice.

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE COLLEGIATE INVOLVEMENT FOR ADULT UNDERGRADUATES?

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presented as part of the

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Adult learners' engagement and successful participation in undergraduate collegiate studies represent a disjuncture with current undergraduate participation and persistence theory frameworks. These theory and research frameworks of young adult undergraduate academic integration, successful academic performance, and collegiate involvement would suggest that adult students would not be successful in college. Based on these perspectives, adult undergraduates would receive lower grades, have lower levels of satisfaction, and have higher rates of attrition (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987). Why this set of assumptions for failure or deficiency regarding adult learners? The majority of adult students are part-timers; they do not live on campus or participate in most collegiate activities nor rarely spend time out of class with faculty or other students. They more often participate in evening, weekend, or specialized adult programs and often have episodic enrollment. From these current theories on collegiate involvement and participation, adult undergraduates represent high-risk, marginal, and non-engaged students in the college environment.

Current research examining adult students' academic performance and their perceptions of participation and satisfaction support counterintuitive findings. From a growing body of research findings, adult undergraduate students have demonstrated comparable, if not higher grades. In addition they have reported higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience than younger college students (Kasworm &

Pike, 1994; Kasworm, 2002). Anecdotal evidence from faculty and select university administrators report that adult undergraduates students are valued for their maturity, motivation, and commitment to pursuing undergraduate education (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). However, because adult students are predominantly re-entry, part-time students, there are still questions regarding the potential successful completion of adult learners in undergraduate studies. Because of these contradictions between the theory of successful collegiate involvement and the reality of success by adult undergraduates, this paper will present a current synthesis of key research and new understandings of adult learners' participation and involvement in undergraduate collegiate studies. I will suggest that we need new theory and understandings to provide broader and more complex frameworks for understanding and supportive adult student engagement in undergraduate studies.

Issues regarding adult students' patterns of participation

Problematic perspectives examining collegiate participation with adult students

Research on persistence or attrition has always been highly problematic when considering adult student participation. Most adult students represent "interrupted enrollments;" they typically are re-entry undergraduate students, having left college in their earlier years to pursue full-time adult roles. These adults are more often part-time attendees; they rarely have opportunities to be a full-time student and reside on the college campus. In addition, they concurrently pursue complex and competing lives, while engaged in a student role and these roles reflect significant adult responsibilities that sometimes impact the adult's abilities to be continuously enrolled. Thus, from the traditional assumptions of collegiate persistence, the adult student population is a high-

risk, more marginal group who should have significant problems in both their academic involvement and their successful completion of collegiate studies.

Beyond questionable research frameworks, undergraduate participation and persistence is also problematized by the unit of analysis in these investigations. Current assessments of collegiate participation and persistence have been based at the institutional level. Thus, national statistics of four-year college drop out and stop out rates by institution suggest that approximately 63% of undergraduate students (both younger and older students) do not complete a four-year degree program within a five-year period and often drop out or stop out of college without a degree during this five year period (Adelman, 199; Tinto, 1987). The disjuncture of this frame is that the statistics speak to "native students," individuals who typically enter into one institution as first semester freshmen and supposedly are full-time continuously enrolled and focused to complete their degree within five years. However, as noted by Adelman (1999) of the National Center for Educational Statistics in his national examination of collegiate participation, the unit of analysis should be focused upon degree completion of the student, not persistence within one institution. In examining the nature of adult student participation, the vast majority of adults bring prior collegiate experiences as they seek renewed participation. For example, anecdotal accounts from several four year institutions with over 15% of adults in their undergraduate enrollment, suggest that between 5 to 25% of freshmen represent adult students over the age of 25 years of age (Kasworm, 1990). The remainder of their "new" adult student population (75% to 95%) was transfer or reentry students; these students brought between 1 to 15 collegiate transcripts of other prior institutional enrollments. (For example, in my work with University of Houston-Clear

Lake [an upper-division and master's degree institution], the average adult student entering as a junior brought four transcripts of prior collegiate work.)

From these different vantage points, both Adelman and Kasworm suggest that a more accurate descriptive picture of undergraduate participation (and specifically of adult students) should reflect a longitudinal tracking of the individual learner across institutions (Kasworm, 1995) and include gathering of data to delineate patterns of degree completion (Adelman, 1999). Two studies of adult undergraduate students have pursued focused descriptive examinations of adult students' participation and characteristics of their degree completion. Each study has suggested that adult degree completion is based in a different set of factors than assumed full-time, residential enrollment participation. In the Mishler, Frederick, Hogan, and Woody study (1982) of adult students' patterns of participation, adults enroll and graduate on varied timelines, supporting their slower and varied pace of course involvement. In this study, 44 percent of the adults were in part-time enrollment and thus presented a longer period of time to graduation, while 54 percent of adults presented a shorter time period because they maintained full-time enrollment. While participating as college students, both groups were also pursuing full-time work and providing main support for families (Mishler et al., 1982; Robertson, 1991). In a second study of adult undergraduates' progress towards graduation, women students were more likely to reflect interruptions in enrollment. However, there was a cautionary note that when women presented similar patterns of interruption as the male students, they progressed at roughly the same rate (Robertson, 1991). Both of these studies suggested that the institution cannot expect all adult students to reflect one pattern of participation or project a specific time period of involvement for graduation. Rather,

there are complex factors that include the adults' responsibilities beyond the student role, as well as other unknown factors both in the adult student's lives, as well as in the environment of the college that influence their pace and consistency of collegiate participation.

Focus on the learner to define enrollment participation and notions of persistence

Because current national statistics track collegiate participation by single institution enrollment, there are no comparative national statistics regarding adult student enrollment patterns. These national statistics ignore a large entry group of transfer students and obviously ignore the potential linkage between the two year community college and the four year college and university. And as noted above, these statistics ignore, if not denigrate, the infusion of adult students and their uniquely different enrollment efforts. Thus, one major recommendation regarding future research on adult involvement suggests that researchers to track collegiate involvement across the undergraduate lifespan to degree completion and across institutions of enrollment. enrolled in that institution. Because adult students are predominantly re-entry students, this line of research could investigate both how adults participate in college, but also further consider adult's rationale for exiting or entering college in relation to their adult life supports and life deterrents as well as their collegiate institutional barriers and supports. No longer would college persistence suggest "staying enrolled" for five years and graduating. New concepts and frameworks would provide an elaborated understanding of the patterns of completion in relation to key factors of support and of nonsupport.

Shift of perspective of involvement based in adult worlds and needs

The current mainstream view of collegiate participation has focused upon the importance of undergraduate student involvement to include the important role of faculty student out-of-class interactions, as well as campus co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Few studies have examined students who have limited or no involvement in the campus collegiate scene. In particular, adult learners are presumed to be less engaged, because they don't spend their out-of-class time on the campus and engage in collegiate activities. What are participation patterns of adults in collegiate out-of-class activities and related student support services? In one institution-based study, adults were less likely than younger students to participate in "assimilation services," such as orientation, campus union, religious centers, on-campus housing. In comparison to younger students, they were also less likely to access "mandatory interaction services" designated by policy or required student funding, such as student health, student activities, and academic advising. However, adults were more likely to participate in comparable ratios to younger students with the individualized academic support services such as tutorial services (Kasworm, 1980, March). In the Kasworm 1980 study, adults noted their significant lack of interest in utilizing campus services when they currently had easy access and often long-term relationships with comparable community services such as family physician, community social and cultural activities, and other related personal or family engagements. In a more recent study (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994), adults across a variety of institutions (community colleges, four-year universities, and adult degree programs in private liberal arts institutions) self-reported high use of admissions, library, and registrar services, with lesser use of advisement and financial

aid, and almost no use of health, placement, and counseling services. Only a very select subgroup of students, those who were in full-time enrollment and attended college during the daytime hours, suggested use of student organizations or campus-based activities. These studies and other institutional studies suggest that adults are highly selective about involvements beyond their in-classroom attendance. They typically choose only those activities directly connected to their involvement in the classroom and continued success in their academic lives (Kasworm, 2002).

How should researchers consider the "non-involvement" of adult students in co-curricular and extra-curricular services and experiences? Past theoretical frameworks on involvement suggest that the immersion of the collegiate student into the full life of the campus creates greater satisfaction and success in undergraduate students (Astin, 1985; Boyer, 1987). The paradox is that adult students are not typically involved in the campus life, yet report similar or higher levels of satisfaction with the collegiate institution and have comparable or higher grade point averages. Of equal interest to the above question, would be how do adults locate their sense of satisfaction and success. Adult students, by the very nature of their enrollment as a re-entry student and their typically episodic participation in college, do not and should not, reflect the same set of assumptions concerning the characteristics and participation patterns of younger adult collegiate students. Adult students are fundamentally influenced in different ways regarding their sense of involvement and place in the college experience. In particular, adult students question the priority in their lives for spending discretionary time on the campus with on-campus involvements, while not participating in their family, children, or community

activities (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994).

Examining adult student participation through new research

To provide new perspectives for examining adult participation and involvement, the following key discussions based in recent research investigations provide guidance: 1) engagement at a personal level in the "connected classroom," 2) meaning-making in the classroom and its relationship to the learning community, and 3) adult perceptions of institutional characteristics and related beliefs about adult involvement.

Engagement at a personal level in the "connected classroom"

Contrary to the premise of student involvement from a holistic immersion into the collegiate on-campus scene (Astin, 1984, 1985; Boyer, 1987), recent research has offered evidence that the classroom is the center stage for the learning and for the collegiate success of adults. For most adult students, their experience of college is from their classroom experiences and with key in-class relationships or related academic relationships with staff and faculty who facilitate their involvement in the classroom (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Donaldson, 1991; Kasworm, 1990, Fall, 2003, February; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Kasworm & Marienau, 1997; Kasworm, 1997). Adults reflect a boundary-spanning involvement in the larger world beyond the college. They look to the classroom world for focused learning of content, potential engagement with experts (faculty), and for their goals of career enhancement, personal growth, or other related personal and professional interests (Kasworm, 1990, Fall; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Their classroom world is their collegiate world.

In a key study of ninety adult students from six different institutional settings, these adults strongly valued and most actively engaged with in-class relationships with faculty members and related learning experiences. Few of these students noted engagement in campus co-curricular or extra-curricular activities (Kasworm, 2003, February; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Known through the metaphor of "**the connecting classroom**," adult students believed that the most powerful influence on their campus experiences were class-related learning successes and their relationships with faculty. Further, these adult students suggested their primary support come from family, friends, and co-workers in their own adult community of influence, while also valuing collegiate personnel who facilitated their academic involvement in their college or university. These findings are in contrast with research on traditional-aged students where the primary impact of support comes from involvement with collegiate peers and in peer-related activities outside of class, as well as their general involvements with the collegiate environment of personnel, services, and activities.

For adult students, the classroom is seen as the center stage of their collegiate experience (Kasworm, 1995; 1997), and they participate in the college experience through this "connecting classroom." This classroom environment provides the collegiate social context for learning and for defining their role as college students. In addition, through the instructional and interpersonal role of the faculty, adult students comes to believe that there is a connection between themselves as adult learners, the content and learning outcomes of the course, and their adult lives. If the classroom lacks this connectedness, adult students, depending upon their knowledge voice (to be discussed in the following paragraphs), may note dissatisfaction and superficial learning

actions. Thus, collegiate involvement for adults is dependent upon a "connecting classroom," a classroom experience that connects with them as individual adult learners, as individuals with adult life styles, and with adults who bring past experiences to the current expertise of the faculty instructor, the class content, and their fellow classmates.

Meaning-making structures in the classroom

How can we come to understand adult student involvement in the connecting classroom? As noted above, the classroom is the main stage for adult students in their creation and negotiation of meanings for collegiate learning and for collegiate involvement. This notion of the connected classroom reflects particular meaning structures that shape the adult students' involvement in the classroom and in the college (Kasworm, 2003, February, 2002). Adult student meaning structures, called knowledge voices, are based in constructivist's understandings of the individual engagement in seeking meaning based upon their own life world. These adults make ongoing judgments of engagement in specific knowledge activities related to their beliefs of its importance to their adult lives, as well as to their success in the collegiate learning enterprise.

The concept of knowledge voices is based in the adult undergraduates' conception of their undergraduate learning in relation to the nature and type of knowledge. Most of the adult students spoke to a bifurcated identification of academic knowledge (knowledge in the classroom that focuses upon theory, concepts, and rote memorization, of book learning) or of real world knowledge (knowledge that directly informs adult's daily actions in the world; knowledge that has immediate application and life relevance; of learning from doing) (Kasworm, 2003, February). These perceived differences of knowledge were often vividly portrayed by some groups of adult students as separate

mental compartments for learning in specialized ways. Thus, as they acted from their beliefs about valued knowledge, they would frame their acts of learning in either superficial or in-depth engagement in the classroom content. Thus, their meaning structures (knowledge voices) would provide a frame to consider the knowledge in relation to its importance for classroom success or as defined and judged for application in their key adult roles (e.g., worker, family member, community leader). These adults also made complex metacognitive decisions about their approaches to learning, based within their beliefs about viable knowledge for their learning goals (Marton, 1976; Saljo, 1979). Depending upon their belief structure (knowledge voice) related to academic or real-world knowledge, they spoke to learning either from a surface level or from an in-depth level of knowledge engagement; some also noted applying both levels of engagement, and a few engaged from a world-view focus on knowledge and learning. These differing meaning structures (knowledge voices) also related to participation within the college classroom and within the adult life world, as well as suggested adult beliefs about participation in learning communities.

Adult undergraduate belief structures of meaning making in the classroom (knowledge voices) represent five types of adult students' current understandings of the nature of knowledge and learning in relation to the classroom and their adult lives (Kasworm, 2003, February). Involvement for these adult students is reflected through these representative meaning worlds. These five knowledge voices, with descriptive

characterizations in Table 1, include:

1. **Entry Voice**
2. **Outside Voice**
3. **Cynical Voice**
4. **Straddling Voice**
5. **Inclusion Voice.**

The meaning structures of the **Entry Voice** are focused upon student engagement for knowledge and learning about how to be successful as a student in the classroom. These students had a dominant concern about learning the role and skills of a successful student and also a concern to learn accurately and thoroughly the content knowledge of the classroom. These students are anchored in pursuing success in the academic knowledge world to the exclusion of their real world of knowledge and adult life engagements. Their only perspective of a learning community would incorporate the classroom activities and related academic services to aid them in academic success.

Two of the voices, the **Outside Voice** and the **Cynical Voice**, represent students anchored in the world beyond the classroom and judge valued knowledge and action through their current adult life roles (often from work roles or from a cultural life role). They make distinctions between their obligatory learning for a grade in the classroom and their learning for effective action in their life-world knowledge of their adult roles. These adult students are anchored in the real world knowledge structures and usually dismiss the academic knowledge structures for guiding their learning and engagement. These individuals have a limited or non existent interest in learning communities. They will engage in a learning community that is reflective of their current adult roles and related

engagements, such as adult workers who are supervisors would potentially value a learning community with similar individuals. The cynical voice adult student is dismissive of any engagement in the collegiate world beyond the minimum presence to survive and complete coursework.

The **Straddling Voice** represents individuals who still believe in the distinction between the worlds of college learning and adult life learning. However, they suggest that they enhance their life-world knowledge when they were able to use what they have learned in college to elaborate on what they knew from their life experiences. They also draw upon their life knowledge to elaborate upon academic knowledge. In essence, they span both knowledge worlds, valuing each world in relation to the other. These individuals do value and engage in collegiate activities and services beyond the classroom, based in their interests, time commitments, and access.

The **Inclusion Voice** represents individuals who do not see these two worlds as separated knowledge and learning experiences. They have a belief that all knowledge is integrated and that they should continue to look to a unity of knowledge and learning, thus transforming real world and academic knowledge from broader, but unified perspectives. They state that they engage in learning for understanding and integrating what they learn across their various adult life roles and collegiate disciplinary knowledge contexts (Kasworm, 2003, February). Inclusion voice adult students value and actively engage in collegiate activities and particularly efforts that provide collaboration with the faculty member. However, as noted in the straddling voice students, these individuals will engage in collegiate activities in relation to their interests, time commitments, and access.

In examining these knowledge voices and related beliefs and actions in adult undergraduates, Kasworm (1995, 1997) found that adult beliefs about learning communities were connected to these perceptions of how they engaged or did not engage in academic learning in relation to their adult roles. Individuals who were anchored in valuing real world knowledge over academic knowledge did not see relevance and did not participate in academic-related learning communities (Outside Voice, Cynical Voice, Entry Voice [note below]). Adult students who were anchored in the academic knowledge structures and valued their academic learning (Straddling Voice and Inclusion Voice) engaged (as their schedules permitted) in varied forms and relationships of formal and informal learning communities in relation to their adult life commitments (Kasworm, 2002). The adult students who were representing the Entry Voice noted that they only engaged in activities that they believed would help them learn the student role and be more successful as students. Because of the powerful influence of the faculty member for entry voice students, they could also be persuaded to engage in learning communities if they believed it would facilitate their academic success (as defined by high grades).

Thus, adult students reflect extremely varied outlooks, goals and needs related to their engagement in formal or informal learning communities. Curiously, academic mandated learning communities through required joint courses and related activities may not necessarily influence the adult students' engagement in learning of knowledge and related participation in the broader academic community. However, when adult students selected to participate in a required class project or a predesignated cohort group design, they actively participated. However, they expressed varied beliefs about that experience of a group class project or a cohort experience in relation to the connected classroom.

These individuals maintained distinct understandings related to their relationship to the faculty member, as well as how they defined successful learning in the course.

This limited discussion of the connected classroom and the meaning structures of adult learners is further elaborated in select publications (Kasworm, 2003, February, 2002). Other researchers, have drawn upon this research and have reported similar findings of adult student's bifurcation of knowledge types and of their related engagement in learning from these belief systems (Cohen, 1998, Fall; Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, & Bradley, 2000, Spring). Thus, the notions of learning involvement should not be defined as a physical and programmatic arrangement to support undergraduate student continued enrollment. Adult students reflect differing notions of congruence of meaning structures in support of their multiple adult worlds, their beliefs about knowledge, and their goals for collegiate engagement. Further, the outcomes of learning community are partially based upon assumptions of valued peer relationships. However, most classrooms are age-integrated, thus adult students view relationships with younger undergraduates from a different perspective, than younger students bonding with other younger students in learning communities. Further, learning communities are typically structured for day-time, on-campus intensive engagements. Obviously, the learning community for part-time adults would need to be reconsidered and redefined to fit their current lifestyles with multiple adult roles, their maturity and related affiliative experiences beyond the college, and select collegiate engagements.

Adult perceptions of institutional characteristics and their importance

Adult understandings of involvement in collegiate environments have also been examined through the adult students' rationale for selection of a particular institution and

related beliefs about the type of desired collegiate institution (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Adult students selected institution, as well as type of institution (community college, university, or adult degree program in a private liberal arts college), based on their beliefs of their current adult situation, their beliefs of the specific collegiate environment, and the relationship of the adult student to the ethos of the institution. These beliefs were further complicated by a number of other influences. Adult students who were in community colleges saw themselves moving into a future four-year institution and had one set of beliefs about their current engagement in the community college in relation to their future planned enrollment in a four-year institution. In addition, adult students who had experienced multiple institutional involvements prior to their current enrollment suggested changing beliefs and needs for different types of institutions over time, as well as drawing upon their past collegiate experiences to assess their current institution and their related involvements.

The Kasworm & Blowers research study (1994) explored adult learner beliefs regarding their enrollment in one of three institutional types (community college, four-year university, and an adult degree program in a liberal arts college representing the six institutional sites and a related six different sets of institutional policies and structures). From this qualitative study of 90 adults, beliefs of selection and involvement were delineated with related implicit understandings of involvement with the institution. The five categories defining involvement and based in institutional type included:

1) involvement influenced by the adult value selection of institution and academic program;

2) involvement as an expression of adult student beliefs regarding their

desires for a quality college education;

3) involvement focused on adult students' beliefs about valued academic learning through the classroom experience;

4) involvement based in the adult students' beliefs about desired and experienced adult learner support environment; and

5) involvement based on adult students' life status related to financial access.

Table 2 presents each category, noting key themes within each category for adult undergraduates in community colleges, public universities and adult- degree programs in private liberal arts colleges.

In this study, adult student involvement was grounded in dialectic between the perceived environment of the institution and the projected impact of that collegiate environment upon the student. These adult undergraduates in the study had specific beliefs and expectations about their involvement in a collegiate institution that affected their selection (Kasworm, 1995; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). These students could have potentially chosen to enroll in at least two of the three institution types within their geographic area in this study. However, they made a purposeful choice of a particular institution. Their beliefs about their selection and future involvement were shaped by perceptions about the context value of the institution and the academic program, beliefs regarding the important elements for a quality college education, and related beliefs about valued learning through the classroom experiences. In addition there were beliefs about their desired and experienced support environment, as well as concerns for financial access to a collegiate education. Varied influences were cited by these adult students for shaping these beliefs. Some noted general knowledge or publicity of the institution, as

well as a belief about certain experiences that should or would occur in a community college, a university, or an adult degree program. In addition, these beliefs may have also been based upon comparative judgments from prior experiences with other institutions, from word-of-mouth of family or colleagues who had attended the institution, or from experiences with the same institution in their earlier adult years.

Beliefs about context of institution. Adult students expressed constructed beliefs regarding the selection of their collegiate institution representing both the nature of the institution but also the expected impacts of this institution on their future. In particular, there were differing beliefs among adults based in their current collegiate context of community college, four-year university, or an adult degree program in a private liberal arts college (Kasworm, 1995). Adults who selected the community college perceived it as psychologically comfortable and geographically accessible. The college was inviting and supportive of them as entering or re-entering adult learners. Some students spoke to a belief of a "stairstep" academic progression from community college to four-year institution. They believed that the community college as an important first step to develop their academic competence and make them academically viable for a four year institution. They also felt that they could not project a lengthy commitment to a four year degree. Thus, getting an associate degree was an important first step and an accomplishment recognized by their employer, colleagues and family.

These adult students noted purposefully selection of a community college because it was more accessible, less expensive, less intimidating, more supportive, and a little bit less academically demanding. They also valued the community college because they believed it offered help for students who needed academic attention. Many noted

concerns about getting their skills and knowledge up to a level to be academically successful at a university. Thus, many students noted, "this institution is committed to helping you to succeed."

Adults who chose the public university believed they should participate in an institution with greater prestige, stronger academic reputation, and national importance. They also wanted to participate in an academic environment which provided challenging and quality learning experiences and/or one which offered a specialized degree unavailable at other institutions (e.g., architecture, engineering, nursing). These adults reported a more complicated entry process because of a perceived need to "fit into" a dominant youth culture of policies, procedures and institutional systems. They also expected a more demanding academic challenge in the classroom with related expectations for academically successful performance. Thus, these adults often reported a more difficult and complicated set of experiences of survival and progress at the university. For them, the university was competitive and demanding. They felt that they were often judged for their worthiness to continue as a student. As one adult noted," It is like Marine boot-camp." And they also noted that the university was not particularly supportive of their part-time involvement enrollment and their competing life demands reflected in adult work and family responsibilities.

Adults who chose the adult degree program in a private liberal arts college were clearly drawn towards the concept of an adult-oriented degree program and related institutional commitments to the adult. They were also drawn to the prestige and historic importance of their respective private liberal arts colleges. (Both of these institutions located in different geographic locations had long historic reputations as distinguished

traditional undergraduate institutions). These adults valued the specific academic support structures for the adult learner and particularly the institutional systems which expressly acknowledged that adult students had full-time jobs and significant family responsibilities. They viewed this environment as extremely supportive, helpful, and personalized. Thus, many students called it a "customized adult learning environment." These adults noted past difficulties with their previous enrollments in universities. These difficulties typically reflected the lack of institutional recognition and related supports for adults, lack of sequential curriculum offerings during accessible hours by adults (in the evenings), insensitive or demeaning faculty and staff to adult students, and also problematic policies and procedures, such as requiring daytime discussion with advisers to change majors or requiring all freshmen to send their grades home to their parents.

Beliefs about the key valued qualities of a collegiate education and related support structures. In this qualitative investigation of adult involvement in collegiate life, adult students had differentiated beliefs about the nature of a collegiate education (Kasworm, 1995). These beliefs appeared to be integral to their beliefs about the selection and participation in a particular type of institution.

For adults in the community college, they valued the academic opportunity to succeed. They noted this belief through related institutional characteristics of ease of admissions, the psychological comfort of entry into the institution, the access to developmental studies, and the perceived instructor's commitment to help them "get the knowledge" to succeed. They believed that the institution was dedicated to helping them move up to the standards required for a university and for later success in an academic major. Thus, they noted both current personal support and success in the community

college, as well as a belief that the community college would prepare them for future success at the four-year college. They also valued the safety net of inter-institutional articulation agreements as they looked to their future university involvement. In their learning experiences, they noted the support for their academic success by both the instructors and the students. They particularly valued the classroom instructor's recognition and use of adults' diverse life experiences in the classroom to help students make sense of the concepts and theories. As they looked at the broad community college environment, they saw faculty and staff express personal interest and concern in their success; they saw course schedules, procedures, policies, and resources that fit adult life needs. Many also noted specific faculty/staff interventions in support of their issues and in support of other adult students who needed special help. From their vantage point, the community college was the ideal environment for them to learn the skills and knowledge to succeed as college students.

Adults in the university settings valued its prestige, its specialization of academic majors, and its complexity of opportunities. They believed they would be getting the best and the brightest of instructors, and that they would have a better, if not the best, college degree available in their region. These adults reported that they entered the university recognizing its highly competitive academic environment, recognizing that they would be judged by high standards, and with the recognition that they would have to survive and thrive on their own because they would probably not get any specialized help or assistance. While noting all of these difficulties or concerns, these adults were typically willing to face these issues based in their belief of the quality and reputation of the institution and the importance of gaining a four year degree.

These adult students recognized the special problems that would occur because of their interrupted involvement in formal learning. They often reported a gap between their current knowledge base and the instructor's beliefs of entering student information base with early classes and the related strategies both successful and not successful to bridge the gap. As these adult students spoke to their involvement in academic learning, they typically desired experiences of shared mutual expertise and development of meanings between themselves, their fellow students, and the faculty instructors. Because of the differing knowledge voices and their meaning structures of knowledge, these adults typically desired, but did not always find faculty valuing or soliciting their "real world" expertise. However, adults in the straddling and inclusion voices (which were the dominant groups interviewed in the university context) did view faculty as peers and mentors in their academic learning journey. .

Because adults at the university view their engagement through a more elitist and academic judging environment, they assumed that the university was not set up to support and service adult students. They experienced significant university bureaucracy. Most adults reported significant to moderate difficulties regarding their own involvement as an "older adult" in a younger adult environment. Thus, their strategies to navigate the university bureaucracy suggested adaptation, patient acceptance, and sometimes high profile negotiations related to the youth-oriented environment of policies and procedures. Among the major issues for adults at the university was the lack of relevant and accessible course schedules and curricula options for evening involvement, as well as the lack of ready acceptance of past academic history to support their current academic efforts. In addition, they questioned how a major university could be so inefficient in

procedures, as well as lacking in customer sensitivity (Kasworm, 1995). Many adults felt like they were treated as second-class citizens.

In adult degree programs in liberal arts colleges, these adults specifically valued the customized academic programs stylized to adult lives. They viewed these programs and organization structures as demonstrating caring support, sensitivity, efficiency, and individualized attention. Adults valued these degree programs (both were management or applied management major program) because they directly related to their work worlds, through the content, the instructors, other students who also were working adults. Most students reported the specific importance of their academic experience in relation to its broader application to their work and life. (This stance was not evident in adult students in community colleges or universities). In addition, these students were receiving employer tuition reimbursement for their participation and were also tacitly told that a college degree was an important goal for their future in the company. They noted specific beliefs about the value of their classroom learning, based in their pragmatic focus upon getting a degree. They felt that the program had made a commitment to provide the courses at convenient evening times and in the sequence stated at the beginning of their program. They saw each class focused upon applications to their work world through the use of case studies and class projects. They felt that their practitioner instructors were knowledgeable about their work life and developed participatory classroom discussions to support the use of classroom knowledge based in their work situations. In essence, classroom learning was learning to be a better and more productive worker.

Many of the adult degree program students reported prior negative experiences with their previous enrollment in other institutions (typically universities). In contrast to

those previous experiences, the adult degree program courses were participatory and oriented to applications in relation to their work environment and broader life. They also found greater in-class connections and development of relationships with adult students. As they spoke to support structures, they highlighted a support environment that was grounded in adult access and designed for adult life circumstances. It provided initial entry support with supportive attention; ease of registration, classroom-based receipt of course books, and advisement conducted in relation to class times. In addition, they both offered reasonable guidelines for acceptance of transferred coursework (including one college's acceptance of assessment of life experiences for academic equivalency credit) (Kasworm, 1995; Kasworm, 2003, Spring).

This research suggests there are differentiated beliefs about the adult learner's selection, entry, and situated experiences and beliefs about the impact of particular institutional settings. Their beliefs about the nature of the institution further demonstrate their lack of interest and engagement beyond the classroom and the significant of the academic classroom and related academic structures for the adult learner.

Implications for future research on adult learner involvement and engagement

The shaping of new understandings as well as future research directions is suggested by the delineated three areas of research: the connected classroom, meaning-making in the classroom learning experience, and the nature of perceived adult student collegiate engagement in a specific institution. As noted earlier, research in the undergraduate experience of adults requires critical examination of past theory and research frameworks in both the literature and in the researchers' beliefs. Past research and beliefs of student persistence and success are often based in assumptions reflecting a

different student population, that of young, full-time students in a liberal arts collegiate environment. This current series of research discussions suggest adult undergraduates view the collegiate experience differently and also purposefully experience and act on the collegiate experience in differently ways from the undergraduate portrayed through research literature based in Astin, Boyer, Tinto, and others. Further, adult students present a different set of challenges to the higher education research community, because they have different characteristics from younger undergraduates that influence their fundamental understandings of the college experience and also influence the particular manner and context for their involvement. In addition, there appear to be differences within the adult undergraduate student population regarding their sense of involvement and engagement in relation to their life biography and their current institutional context. What is effective involvement for adult students? New theory informed by research suggests a focus upon the classroom, rather than the college environment, and upon experiences connected to the current adult lives and knowledge structures rather than collegiate out-of-class experiences for forming more vibrant and vital conceptual frameworks targeted to the adult student.

TABLE 1 - ADULT MEANING STRUCTURES

Belief Structure	Valued knowledge	Valued learning actions	Valued student services	Valued learning community	Valued professor actions	Valued classroom activities	Valued evaluation strategies
Entry Voice	Academic knowledge	How to be a successful student as judged by grades	Entry supports and social connections, admissions, orientation, study and basic skills, first year course, class learning & career supports	Relationship is based in instructor actions to help the adult student get good grades and be successful.	Guiding students to become successful as judged by grades	Direct knowledge organization for memorization or/and providing learning how to learn skills	Clear evaluation strategies for students to show their success on tests and essays
Outside Voice	Real world knowledge	Reinforces current knowledge, Validates knowledge expertise	Efficient access and adult-oriented procedures. Involve with work-related activities Class-focused strategies engaged in the adult's world of action	Real-world connected learning communities; classrooms based in real world applications	Creating learning based in the student's real world understandings; Valuing adult's real world expertise	Knowledge activities that reflects real world realities and future applications. Knowledge that helps them be more competent in the real world	Evaluation that demonstrates their real world applications and competencies
Cynical Voice	Cynical about value and relevance of academic knowledge	No valued learning activities. Participate as a necessary step to gain credential	Efficient access and adult-oriented procedures. Dislikes any social involvement with college & class	No valuing of academic communities. Values real world	Creating non-interactive and non-demeaning classroom and grading practices	Unobserved, uninvolved and isolated	Desire non-graded involvements or being judged successful in the classroom
Straddling Voice	Values both academic and real world knowledge	Creation of applications and connections between two knowledges and worlds	Engages in select collegiate activities focused on adult interests in college Values faculty involvements, honor societies, inquiry interests	Engage in multiple learning communities within the classroom, through work, family, community, and self-defined groups	Creating learning which values both life worlds and both knowledge worlds	Experience active, collaborative, applied learning within classroom and across their adult life roles. Values synthesis and critique	Preferred evaluation that displays new understandings and applications between these two worlds
Inclusion voice	Values the academic world and the integration and creation of new knowledge across both world	Develop complex, multiple world-views and intellectual engagement in knowledge	Values adult access academic activities & faculty efforts Research projects, co-teaching, acts of college nexus	Values the life of the mind and academic and real world communities that support that perspective	Faculty as mentors and colleagues in the intellectual knowledge sharing and creation efforts	Experience theory and application; exploration of ideas of theory and beliefs; critical thinking and analysis.	Values intellectual creation through research papers, research projects, and independent readings.

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Table 2-- Adult Student Categories and Themes of Involvement

Key Categories of Involvement	*Community College Themes of Involvement*	*Public University Themes of Involvement*	*Adult Degree Program in a Private Liberal Arts College Themes of Involvement*
Values for selection of program and institution	Academic opportunity to succeed	Importance and complexity of a university	Customized adult academic program
Beliefs about a quality college education	Current personal support and success & future success in 4-year college	Quality linked to prestige and academic demands	Reputation of college & Support of adult academic requirements
Quality of class academic learning	Learning focused on becoming competent in academic knowledge	Learning focused on expertise sharing and meaning development	Learning focused upon adult learners and their worlds
Adult learner support environment	Particular attention and support for adults	Adapting to fit into the university in relation to adult learner contexts	Programs designed for adult life support environments
Key financial access concern	Financial access and high personal costs	Financial access and high personal costs	Financial access for others and personal financial costs

(Kasworm, 1995; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994)

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